

Part I

ABOUT WOMEN AND DRESS.

BY EUGENE BENSON.

EACH civilized epoch seems to have left us the husks of its taste in which to sheathe our softest flesh. The sweetest bud of Republicanism, the most *piquante* daughter of New England, the most dazzling dame of New York, promenades under such composite costumes, that we question whether she be infatuated with Ohou Ohou, Pompadour, or Eugénie.

Oharming democrats we have in the women of the land. But how religiously they go out of it to seek their fashions! With what jealous reverence they shun the costume of the women of the Revolution, and how carefully they refrain from inventing or adopting a national and simple dress which we can look at without being reminded of the license, and corruption, and folly of Continental life!

[Part II, follows]

Part III

meddle and stimulate; they give to our streets and halls a variegated, flashing, exciting aspect, which at the best we may call brilliant and pictorial. They encourage artifice rather than art; they prefer crowded, ostentatious and novel things, for the artistic instinct, free from the masculine mind, is wilful and unreasoning; it asks only for excitement. If women have made so much confusion and ostentation in the domain of taste, left to themselves, would they increase the harmony of, and develop justice in, legislation? What answer?

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Dress and decoration are wildly confused and meretriciously mixed. We can see but one dominant taste, that of the arbitrary and ostentatious. We cannot say with Landor's *Aspasia*, "Our dress is not the invention of the ignorant; but the sculptor, the painter, and the poet, have studied how best to adorn the most beautiful object of their contemplations." Women have retained the mark of barbarism in the use of ear-rings, and they still carry the glittering trophies of their conquests like savages, in metals and gems about their persons. But the most exquisite and civilized women have always preferred a flower to a gem; and, if they have not made a vow, like the most enchanting woman of antiquity, "never to wear any thing on the head but one single flower, one single wheat-ear, green or yellow, and ivy or vine leaves," they have appeared often enough so adorned to make the vow unnecessary.

Women live under the reign of fantasy. If most of our sisters are, like the Chinese, monotonous imitators of each other in the fashion of their dress, they break out in a riot of colors. If they cannot please, they can shock us by their use of color; and, *en masse*, they please us by their love of it. Like the variegated petals of flowers, they salute the eye or softly win the lingering glance of admiration by exquisiteness of hue. They instinctively feel that they belong to the floral sisterhood. In the spring they dress themselves in fresh and vivid colors; in the autumn they array themselves in scarlet, crimson, and orange, expressing the satisfaction and repletion of life. Quarrel as we may with the shape of the costume, with the vulgar excess of *trimming*, some bit of color about it will make us happy as savages, and we take off our hats to poppies, *bluets*, and violets; to asters, golden-rods, and cardinal-flowers; to roses, apple-blossoms, and lilacs. Some girls and women have their affinity in the floral world; they are the most charming of their sex; they are the human correspondence of some blossom that sheds its fragrance or dazzles with its glowing hue. Woman's *instinctive* taste for dress will express itself in harmony with the sentiment and color of the flower she loves. Yet, in saying this, we do not speak of the herd of women and girls without individuality; of that Chinese crowd of damsels and dames who never change the fashion of their dressmaker, and have not force of taste sufficient to originate a novel or picturesque effect of costume. These daughters of Mandarins case themselves, like a regiment of foolish virgins, in garments that look as if made by contract after one model, duplicated as fast as the skill of "fitters, cutters, and trimmers" can meet their reasonable and unreflecting passion of dress. Such foolish virgins are remarked only because of their numbers; they know nothing of dress as a fine art; they never appear before us like exquisite human incarnations of the toilless beauties of the woods, the gardens, and the meadows; they never walk the streets nor decorate homes to flatter the eye with color, and suggest redolent and delightful influences of purity, peace, and opulence. They neither understand their sex nor feel the artistic instinct of its life.

Man legislates, woman ornates. She is the first artist that Nature gave us. She plays with colors as a child does with flowers. She arranges, but she does not invent. With the exception of Miss Anthony and a few of her scattered and noisy sisters, she shuns abstractions. Instead of trying to remake our laws, she remakes her costume. The caprice of her nature and the extravagance of her fancy are lavished upon the garniture of her person. The advocates of the new social revolution of sex must first suppress the *artiste* in the woman before they can make her equal to legislative functions. Until they have destroyed the playful and charming child in the feminine sex they cannot lift it or abase it to the levelling and mechanical function of man, who substitutes a machine to impulse, and exhausts enthusiasm by patience.

If we look back to the centuries which are the glory and shame of our race, we see that men have shared the taste of women, have obeyed the passion of dress and decoration. But

now, less feminine, less artistic, less barbarous, they have wholly abandoned the art to women, and appear like undertakers and laborers. Since they have forsworn the enjoyment of an art inconsistent with their occupation, and have ceased to take pleasure in picturesque and gaudy or beautiful costumes for themselves, they have been contented with the extension of the passion of dress among women.

Democracy has transformed the appearance of men; it has not touched the nature or costume of women. They remain an exclusive and privileged class by all their instincts; with them license and art take refuge.

Modern civilization has made it possible for all women to display their love of dress and decoration. The confused and incongruous state of the art is to be attributed to the fact that it has been left wholly to the feminine mind, which, abandoned to itself, is lawless and craves for excitement. Dress, as an art, never, until our century, was wholly abandoned to one sex; and it never has been more varied and ostentatious among women than now. It has lost gravity and simplicity of effect; it is full of license, of dazzle, of display; it is sometimes exquisitely frivolous; oftenest it stifles the weak personality of our feeble women. But it has got rid of some barbarisms. The stiff *corsage* of De Medicis is obsolete; the pretty Parisienne has adopted the smallest and most flexible one to girdle her like the cestus of Venus. The Elizabethan frill, framing the head like a white cabbage, hiding the roundest neck and covering the most classic shoulders, is allowed to remain buried among the ceremonials of a stiff court. But, if we must adopt the fashions of our ancestors, why not go to Madame Recamier and claim her as our grandmother? Why not revive the long gauntlets, made to attract attention to beautiful arms? Why not take again her semi-Greek attire—the short waist, the narrow skirt, and the delicate ruffle, to hold all the charms of the girls and women of the land? Such costumes are made only for beautiful women—for women who converse without disputing; for women who neither toil nor spin, but, like the flowers of the field, refresh and charm by their mute and exquisite service in life. But this is a fancy picture—a bit of the past at best; it has gone with the heathen mythology, with the fairies of the North, with all the frail and bright imaginings of poets. We are in an industrial age, and dress and decoration are made for rough service, to arrest hurried and grasping men. Therefore the women of our cities are dressed like regiments; therefore they overload themselves with meaningless trimmings; therefore we have every thing but the simple and unobtrusive which charms us in pictures of Greek women, in the women of the French Revolution, in women of the time of Washington, in the contemporaries of Chateaubriand.

The much-abused classic painter David made a beautiful and simple costume fashionable in France. French women were never more exquisitely dressed than during his epoch. The mania for *trimmings*, which is most violent among American women, is of itself a sign of a corrupted taste—it does more than any other cause to retard the ascendancy of a pure and simple taste. Although women are so universally gifted with the artistic instinct, they have a touch of folly, a love of change, which prevents them from producing the finest results of the artistic faculty. They have lapses, they are dependent; they easily fall under the rule of arbitrary and dictating minds. An incurable frivolity, an unconquerable love of attracting attention, has always made them facile agents to propagate false taste, and render them insensible to the charm of the models of unostentatious epochs, of epochs truly gifted with the sentiment of beauty.

Dress and decoration no more receiving the attention of the serious and restrained minds of men, manifests the confusion and incongruity of the flighty and unrestrained minds of women. The feminine mind is incapable of originating a beautiful fashion. It is too receptive; it is too impressible. It goes through the ages to bring back a piece of patchwork. Women mix and